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Stalinist City Planning. Professionals, Performance and Power

***Europe-Asia Studies* 2015, 67(8), 1329-31**

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09668136.2015.1076112>

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DOI link to article:

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09668136.2015.1076112>

Date deposited:

03/08/2016

Embargo release date:

30 April 2017



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This is a pre-print of a Book Review published in *Europe-Asia Studies* Volume 67, Number 8, (2015). The published review can be found at <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09668136.2015.1076112>

Heather D. DeHaan, *Stalinist City Planning. Professionals, Performance, and Power*. University of Toronto Press, 2013, xii + 255 pp., £48.00/\$70.00 h/b

Stalinist City Planning: Professionals, Performance and Power makes a major contribution to our understanding of how socialism and the new urban society of the 1930s was built. DeHaan seeks to explore the political, aesthetic and ideological disputes that such an ambitious project inevitably created. The book is based on a case study of Nizhnii Novgorod, renamed Gorky in 1932, and the surrounding area, although its implications for understanding urbanisation under Stalin are far reaching. Nizhnii Novgorod offers far more than an important example of rapid urban growth in the face of forced industrialisation; the city's population grew from 259,000 to 452,000 over the course of the First Five-Year Plan (p.5). By moving away from the shadow cast by Moscow's urban development, DeHaan succeeds in opening new perspectives and interpretative avenues. 'Far from Moscow, as she puts it, 'the lines between centre and locality, loyalty and disloyalty, as well as victim and victimizer blurred' (p.11). Architectural politics, both aesthetic and political, begin to look different from the distance of the provinces. Far from being avant-garde intellectuals, the city's planners were political actors, caught up in the inherently political struggle for materials, financial and labour resources. Projecting their own professional credentials and expertise often necessitated their participation in a political performance. Trying to make their complex visions of the modern city of the future a concrete reality in the face of the messy reality of urban life drew them even further into politics. As DeHaan reminds us, 'Planners did not have the luxury of dealing with abstract plans and ideas alone. They dealt with a city of actual people, events and materials' (p.13).

Stalinist City Planning, far more than many works of Soviet urban history, takes the procedures and processes of planning seriously. DeHaan explores features of urban planning, such as traffic flows, drainage and pollution, often neglected by the literature. The mastery of the detail of how plans were negotiated between a bewildering array of competing institutions, each with their own responsibilities and priorities, the challenges present by Nizhnii Novgorod's relief, soil and hydrology, however, are never allowed to dominate. Given such depth and detail it is unsurprising that this book rests on a wealth of published and unpublished sources. Perhaps the most distinctive feature of DeHaan's analysis, which is central to the book, is her argument that 'socialism was not a discourse-bound civilization' (p.14) but a complicated and multivalent performance. Far from passive subjects responding to the centre's dictates, planners were actors on the city's symbolic landscape, a stage for their performance. The two central protagonists in this urban drama are Alexander Ivanitskii, to whom the task of drawing a plan for Nizhnii Novgorod fell in 1928, and his successor Nikolai Solofnenko. While Ivanitskii's approach to planning was pragmatic and grounded in science; Solofnenko was a master of the Stalinist performance. His exploits in distracting the city-council with trademark 'razzle-dazzle', barefaced deception and plagiarism make for particularly entertaining reading. Urban plans, in DeHaan's reading, become scripts for this performance, plans which given the complicated and messy realities of Stalinist urban life frequently required improvisation.

The book comprises seven well-crafted chapters. Chapter one introduces the reader to Nizhnii Novgorod's urban fabric, guiding the reader through the architectural inheritance that Ivanitskii was faced with in 1928. Here, DeHaan demonstrates that from its medieval foundation through to its

nineteenth-century industrialisation Nizhnii Novgorod's urban landscape served as a stage for projecting imperial and political power, exploited for political ends by both Peter the Great and Nicholas I. Chapter two explores the visionary avant-garde plans for redesigning the city. The construction of the Ford Factory Town of Avtozavod providing an excellent opportunity for drafting visions of the socialist city of the future, visions which often did not survive contact with the reality of Soviet urban life. In chapter three we begin to see Ivanitskii's plans for the city's redesign develop, plans that were often grounded in science and pragmatism. Although an astute operator capable of navigating his way through competing pressures, Ivanitskii's vision ultimately fell victim to shifting political realities. From 1935, as chapter four explores, new official aesthetics heralded even greater political intervention in planning, and the development of an iconographic vision of the city. What emerged in new plans, largely in response to the 1935 Moscow city plan, was a radical vision of, 'an industrial, highly centralized, and monumentalized city' (pp.104–5). These new iconographic spaces, 'were designed to offer hope, community, and a sense of pride in the Soviet state' (p.108), in other words to serve politics. In the following chapter the full extent of Solofnenko's performance becomes clear. Amongst the most remarkable features of his 'powerful smoke-and-mirrors circus act' (p.111) was his ability to draw the audience into the performance as active participants. Through press campaigns and citizen feedback Solofnenko was harnessing rituals and practices more commonly linked with late socialism. Finally in chapters six and seven the improvisations required to address the flaws in the plan are explored. Planners' visions of the future often seemed very distant from the reality of urban space, and the obstacles created by red tape, and the persistent shortages of materials and labour. Yet, even eradicating these problems created opportunities for projecting political power, with campaigns for urban improvement (*blagoustroistvo*) offering opportunities for the collective performance of socialism.

In summary, DeHaan argues that planners' performance on the urban stake helped them project their own professional authority and Stalinist political power. Urban planning did not fail because of its backwardness, indeed planning infrastructure under Ivanitskii appears remarkably developed, but because of politics and the encounter with the messy complexity of Soviet urban life. *Stalinist City Planning* is fluently written, meticulously researched, and extensively illustrated. DeHaan's excellent study deserves to be read widely, not simply by scholars interested in the urbanisation of Russia and the Soviet Union in the 1930s. Historians of Stalinism more generally will find much of interest and value here, especially for thinking about how socialism was built, both literally and metaphorically.

(998 words)

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